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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Texas's Lee College (LC) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. LC's goal for the project has been to enhance the faculty's ability to fulfill its mission. The team's focus was on broadening the cultural understanding of the faculty so that they would incorporate additional materials into their courses. Specifically, the program would highlight the cultural heritage of the Mexican-American students. As a result of the team's efforts and work with their mentor, LC plans to make a significant change in the academic preparation of future LC graduates entering the health care occupations. This program, which would combine language, history, and cultural studies to provide future health care workers with a background in Hispanic culture, still must be approved by the state and accrediting agencies. Other accomplishments include the compilation of a bibliography of materials relating to multicultural perspectives on the notion of "death" and the improvement in the college's library materials. The program's greatest obstacle was the limited amount of faculty time available for participation. Remaining tasks include creating a symposium and programs on Mexican-American culture, adding medical cultural practices of the Texas border region to a Spanish class, and increasing library holdings. (HAA)

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Exploring America's Communities: Lee College Progress Report

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LEE - COLLEGE

December 11, 1996

Diane U. Eisenberg, Project Director
One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 410
Washington, DC 20036

Exploring America's Communities: Lee College Progress Report

Established in 1934, Lee College is a comprehensive, public, two-year community college located in Baytown, Texas, a suburb of Houston. In addition, Lee College serves portions of the largely rural counties of Liberty and Chambers. Through a variety of programs and services, Lee College prepares students for success in higher education or employment. Lee College also provides a broad base of programs including extension courses, adult education, continuing education, and community services. During the 1996-97 academic year, Lee College will enroll over 12,000 credit-seeking students. These students reflect the service-area community in diversity: 71 percent Anglo, 15 percent Hispanic (most of whom are Mexican-American), 12 percent African-American, and 2 percent other minorities. The college offers a variety of degrees—Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, and Associate of Applied Sciences—in 34 disciplines, 27 of which are technical areas. The number of technical courses reflects the heavy industrial base of the Baytown community, which includes several large petrochemical and chemical companies. Because, however, of its long history and traditional junior college roots, Lee

P. O. Box 818 • Baytown, Texas 77522-0818 • 713-427-5611

Lee College does not discriminate on the basis of gender, disability, race, color, age, religion or national origin.

College also has a strong liberal arts base and a core curriculum that stresses the humanities.

Since the primary mission of Lee College is to serve the educational needs of its community, the goal of its Exploring America's Communities: In Quest of Common Ground project has been to enhance the faculty's ability to fulfill its mission. The project team had concerns that the diversity of the faculty did not match the diversity of the student body. The team's focus, therefore, was to broaden the cultural understanding of the faculty so that the faculty would, in turn, incorporate additional materials into its courses. In particular, the team focused on the rich Hispanic culture of the Mexican-American students in the college population. The specific goal was to conduct workshops that examined the commonality existing between a selected number of cultural themes important to this Hispanic population and those of the entire student body. The team hoped that increasing the faculty's knowledge and comfort-level with these themes would encourage infusion of relevant literature and history into the existing curriculum.

As a result of our team's efforts, the people associated with Lee College have had several opportunities to consider the topic of American pluralism and identity. The team and its mentor, Dr. Salazar, have discussed the issues with our college president and academic dean, as well as with the chair of our institution's Allied Health division. The result of these conversations, if the state accepts our recommendation, will be a significant change in the academic preparation of future Lee College graduates entering the health care occupations. Later, in a public forum on the cinematic depiction of the American west, whose attendees included actress Carol Baker, Hollywood producer Burt Kennedy, novelist Elmer Kelton, and the western film savant, Jon Tuska, the question of to what

extent the shared experience of the western movie was one of the cultural ties that, like the viewing of televised sports events today, has unified the American public since World War II. The film experts were also asked to what extent the western movie of those years tended to marginalize non-white, minority Americans. Other accomplishments from our year's activity in the AACC project include the compilation of a bibliography of printed material relating either directly or indirectly with the subject of death as it is dealt with by writers who approach the subject from a Mexican, Central American, and South American point of view. Finally, the Lee College community has also benefited from an improvement in our library's collection of materials, which now better reflect the lives and interests of our Spanish speaking community.

As a team, our greatest obstacle has been a lack of time to dedicate to the goals of our mission. Not only have we been busy teaching our classes and serving on our committees, but our colleagues' time as well has been equally occupied. At one workshop for Lee College faculty, at which we spent an afternoon helping instructors learn to pronounce the names of the Hispanic students in their classes, many of our colleagues were unable to attend, not for a lack of commitment to their students nor for a lack of interest in our topic, but simply because the Lee College faculty is very busy.

Much remains to be done with this project. Because of the timing of the AACC grant and the timing of the academic year, the anticipated year of the project was actually compressed into one fall semester. The original proposal called for a symposium program that spotlighted important aspects of Mexican-American culture with a component for students and a separate one for faculty. The planning for such a symposium for Spring 1997 is currently under way. With the financial support of the college Lyceum

Committee and the literary resources of the Arte Publico Press, located at the University of Houston, the college is planning an April 1997 program featuring a number of Mexican-American authors who stress cultural elements in their work.

In addition, the large Allied Health faculty at the college is interested in developing a course that would be required of their students that would combine conversational Spanish with education about the cultural practices of the Texas border region, particularly those that surround medicine and healing. *Curanderoismo*, the focus of one of the project workshops, is only part of the rich tradition of natural healing that composes the border culture. With a growing Hispanic population in our service area, the Lee College Allied Health faculty feel that graduates of their programs would profit from an increased ability to communicate with patients, as well as an increased understanding of their patients' concerns and medical backgrounds. Because, however, the curriculum for Allied Health students is an extremely crowded one, these students do not have space for the traditional two to four semesters of college Spanish. The project team will, therefore, work with the Allied Health faculty over the next two years to develop a one-semester, three-credit-hour course that combines specialized language instruction with history, literature, and cultural components. If approved by the state and other accrediting agencies, this course would become a required part of the Lee College nursing curriculum in the 1999-2000 academic year.

A third major area of continued work on this project is increased library holdings. The project team is currently working with the college administration to find grant money to improve library holdings in the area of Hispanic, particularly Mexican-American, literature, language, history, and culture. The library has already used a bibliography

developed by our team's mentor, Dr. Carmen Salazar, to order several hundred dollars worth of additional materials. If grant money can be secured, other titles from the bibliographies developed by the project team members will be ordered and a bibliography of materials available in the Lee College library will be developed.

Basically, what remains to be done is for the conversation on American pluralism and identity to spread. The conversations that we have held have been received and expanded with enthusiasm, but the Lee College team remains convinced that time to explore, consider, and converse is the true enemy of finding that common ground which we all seek.

The grand philosophical questions: What does it mean to be an American? What divides us? What brings us together? What do we have in common? Are difficult ones to engage faculty and students' attention because they focus instead on the mundane questions of education: What will be on the next test? What do I have to do to pass this course? What do I have to do to get my students' attention? How can I possibly grade these papers before next Tuesday? Most, in fact, seem uncomfortable with these questions and inclined to let only the most assertive respond. However, with time and encouragement, students, in particular, are fascinated with questions about what divides us and what brings us together.

Recently, a small group of sophomore students, all women, began by identifying gender, ethnicity and religion as areas that divide us. Their reasoning was that these topics are uncomfortable for mixed groups to discuss. As one African-American student said, "The surest way to bring any conversation with a white person to a halt is the mention of race. I noticed this last year when I made the statement that most African-Americans

thought O. J. Simpson was innocent. That was it--no more discussion of the Simpson trial. In fact, I started saying it on purpose when I was tired of hearing about Simpson. It worked every time." All the students agreed. Americans, they said, are curious about differences among groups, but they do not want to hurt others' feelings or to start disagreements. In fact, the group decided after considerable discussion that perhaps one thing that unites ordinary Americans is our dislike of and discomfort with controversy and difference. Americans, they said, prefer to ignore difference, especially if the points of view cannot easily be resolved or are based on long-standing or traditional conflicts. Ironically, several students said afterwards that the discussion was the best of the semester.